

Coerced

by Larner

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Summary: A Shire lawyer has a conversation with the deputy Mayor.

References to my other stories based on the time when Frodo served in this capacity.

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\_My birthday mathom to all for 2016.\_

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"Mr. Baggins, sir?"

Frodo looked up from the document he was studying to find himself faced by a Hobbit some years younger than himself, rather stout with limp brown hair crowned with quite a tall, battered hat, clothed in dark green and brown, the clothing well worn at this point. It took a moment to recall this Hobbit's name. "Eustus Grubb?" he asked. At the other's nod, he continued, "How might I help you, Mr. Grubb?"

Eustus Grubb removed his hat, turning it nervously between his fingers, his eyes now downcast to watch his hands as they fingered its rim. "I wanted to thank you," he said in a low voice, "for not putting me in the new Lockholes the way you did to Timono Bracegirdle and Marco Smallburrow."

Frodo dropped the document onto the Mayor's desk, wincing with the pain of a new headache brought on by just thinking of those two of Lotho's most active allies in the last Sackville-Baggins's assaults on the people of the Shire. He massaged his temples and rubbed at his eyes before squinting up at the Hobbit standing across the desk from him. "Ought I to have done so?" he asked. "After all, the evidence was that you, as was true of several others, were coerced into presenting the three crooked contracts presented under your name. It was obvious that you did not write them, and the Delvers have made it plain that they believed at the time you were embarrassed and were

acting under duress. Were they wrong? Were you willingly taking part in Lotho and Timono's schemes to cheat others?"

Eustus flushed. "Stars, no!" he answered. "It's just that Pimple let me know that if I didn't do as he said he'd find some reason to put my cousin Ted into the Lockholes. I couldn't let that happen, you know. He's always been rather a hothead, he has, and it wouldn't have been hard to goad him into doing somethingâ€”indiscreet."

Frodo winced again. Ted Grubb-Longbottom had always tended to say what he thought with little consideration for how what he said might be taken by other people. "I see," he said.

Eustus gave another slight nod and set the hat down upon the desk. "I've always been about the only one who could keep Ted in any kind of line," he said, apparently addressing his hands as they held the hat down as if it might otherwise escape and roll out of the Mayor's office and on out of the Council Hole as well. "I just don't understand why they chose me to present those contracts for them."

Frodo sighed. "Do you think that the Delvers would have willingly had anything to do with any schemes presented to them by either Lotho or his cousin Timono Bracegirdle?" he asked. "Not after the time Lotho mocked Garros at the Free Fair seven years ago, I'd think."

The Grubb indicated his agreement. "True, that," he said.

"I am glad that you did not do as you did willingly," Frodo continued. "But I'd have been difficult to convince that your father's son would have happily become a willing partner to the likes of Lotho, Marco, or Timono."

Eustus looked up, obviously surprised. "You don't think I'd be capable of that?" he asked.

"Of course not! Your dad was as honest a Hobbit and a Shire lawyer as I've ever known, Eustus, and I never saw in you any signs when you were a lad you'd be any different than he was."

Again the Grubb looked down at the top of his hat. "I doubt Dad would have let himself be maneuvered by the likes of Lotho and Timono."

"Perhaps not, but then he didn't have Ted to take thought of as you did."

After a pause Eustus asked, "Then why didn't you take me on as your personal lawyer after my dad?"

Frodo looked at him with surprise. "But you were still in your apprenticeship when your dad quit serving as a Shire lawyer, Eustus. I used him as my personal lawyer mostly because Bilbo had used him for so long and he knew our business so well, but when he decided he couldn't keep on with the work I needed a lawyer \_then\_. Brendi was accepted by Will at that point, and I both knew him well and trusted him implicitly." He searched the Grubb's face. "Did you truly expect me to wait until you were accepted to write contracts before I took a new lawyer? I am very sorry, but as your father could have told you I had more than enough farm shares and partnership agreements at that

time, both my own and those I inherited from Bilbo, to get on with, and I was not in a position to wait for you to finish all your training. But I knew that there would be a good deal of work for you from our mutual Grubb relatives who could afford to wait for you to be accepted into the Guild."

Frodo paused to take a sip from the mug that sat beside the document he'd been reading, keeping his eyes on the lawyer. He set it down thoughtfully before continuing, "I am sorry I may have given you the idea that I was not loyal to your father or your family, Eustus."

Eustus was flushing heavily at that point. "It's my own fault, taking it personally when you went to one of your Brandybuck relatives after my dad decided to retire. I'm sorryâ€"ought not to have thought of it as you not thinking I was good enough, I suppose. It was foolish to think you mightâ€"just wait until I was ready to serve as a lawyer, too."

He looked about the room. "Don't know why you didn't take to the law yourself. I'm told you're doing well going through all that built up while Will was shut up in the Lockholes, and that you were the one who began realizing just how Lotho and Timono were using special wording to take property from other people. I never liked Lotho to begin with, and after what Timono convinced me to offer to others for Pimple's benefit I hate them both. I'm just glad that the Delvers seem to realize I didn't want to cheat them."

Frodo was already shaking his head. "I never wanted to be a lawyer. I've always preferred to study history and languages and such. In fact, it was my knowledge of language and how context can completely change meaning that led me to realize just how Lotho and his toadies were taking advantage of ambiguous standard phrases in our contracts to get away with what they were doing.

"Are you doing all right, Eustus? You don't look as if business were as good for you as it was before I left the Shire."

Eustus shrugged, his eyes again fixed on his battered hat. "After some of my former clients saw how a contract I'd presented to the Delvers had led to the Delvers losing their inn in Greenholm, word spread quick that I was apparently in cahoots with Pimple, and my business fell off. And I couldn't say anything, or I was assured they'd use any excuse to put Ted away. I don't know if I'll ever recover from losing my reputation this way."

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Frodo leaning over the desk to offer him reassurance. "I suspect," the Baggins said gently, "that as more people realize how low Lotho had fallen they will forgive you, understanding that you and others like you were being threatened and forced to do what you did."

Eustus felt tears threatening to escape. His voice was husky as he said, "I didn't think that you'd understand, Frodo. I don't know how you can forgive me for betraying folks like the Delvers."

Frodo looked away, rubbing at his left shoulder as if it suddenly were hurting. "Oh, I now have a deep appreciation for how people can beâ€"coerced, Eustus Grubb. I understand all too well. Now, get on with you. They are starting to serve at the innâ€"go and have a good

meal and tell Bobbin to put it on my account. After all, it appears that Lotho used what he anticipated I'd do one day in tricking far too many people into signing into questionable contracts with him. If I'd not agreed to sell him Bag End and then left the Shire as I did a good many contracts he offered others would never have come due unexpectedly. I am most likely more to blame for what happened to the populace of the Shire than you are."

Frodo smiled dismissively and took up the document once more, leaving Eustus free to head off to a good meal feeling more encouraged than he'd been in several months.

End  
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